



## State of Connecticut

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### *SB 153 An Act Providing a Safe Harbor for Exploited Children*

Good afternoon, Senator Musto, Representative Urban, Senator Boucher, Representative Hovey, and members of the committee. My name is Rob Kane, and I am the Senator for the 32<sup>nd</sup> district. I come before you this afternoon to testify in support of SB 153, *An Act Providing a Safe Harbor for Exploited Children*, and to strongly urge this committee to pass the bill.

The tragic news we read or see on a daily basis tends to harden us. With few exceptions, almost nothing truly shocks us anymore. But one of those exceptions is stories about children being sexually abused or exploited. Every time I hear of such a horrific crime, I am filled with a variety of emotions. I am disgusted that there are people who would prey on our innocent children. I am saddened that our society has to deal with such crimes. I am shocked that we do not punish these abusers more harshly. I am heartbroken for the lost innocence of the child. And I am angered that there are not sufficient programs or policies in place to help heal these children, to help repair the damage done to them.

It is the desire to help these abused children get the assistance they need that spurred me to propose SB 153. The bill, as I proposed, creates a presumption that any minor child who is engaged in prostitution was either forced or enticed to do so. It offers protection to a minor from criminal prosecution for actions that they had no choice but to commit. But my original proposal went well beyond the scope of this bill. It required the courts to direct the child into existing social service programs that could offer assistance in safe and secure housing, crisis intervention, counseling, and other community based services. It sought to ensure that there was a safety net in place so that these troubled children did not fall through the cracks of society. It is not enough to just let the minors

go free, to return them to a situation that probably gave rise to their crimes and troubles in the first place. We need to do more. We need to give them a chance to rebuild their lives.

This bill, modeled on a similar proposal passed into law in New York two years ago, seeks to address what is tragically an all too common problem. Some experts estimate that about 100,000 children, many as young as 11, are exploited through prostitution every year in the United States. So while we may sit here today and think that such a crime cannot happen here, we are wrong. It can, and does, happen. And it happens far more often than we would like to admit to ourselves.

As members of a just society, we should be committed to ensuring that young victims of sexual exploitation are given every possible opportunity to break free from emotional manipulation and abuse. The first logical step is passing a state law that recognizes the need to protect, not punish, children and young teens who are apprehended for prostitution. The bill before you today is a start, but it does not go far enough. I ask you to expand the bill to provide the referral to existing social services providers that were eliminated from my original proposal. These exploited and abused children need our help, and deserve every chance to reclaim their lives. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of the bill, and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.